West Coast states, British Columbia launch resources to spur EV adoption

Brittany Patterson, E&E reporter, ClimateWire

July 31, 2015

A regional collaborative of West Coast states and British Columbia is zooming ahead with an initiative aimed at increasing the adoption of zero-emission vehicles in public and private fleets.

Launched yesterday at the EV Roadmap 8 conference in Portland, Ore., the project, called West Coast Electric Fleets, provides fleet operators with access to resources like cost calculators and webinars to help them take gas vehicles out of rotation and replace them with zero-emission vehicles (ZEVs).

The initiative covers cars and light trucks operated by the same public or private entity and is the latest from the Pacific Coast Collaborative, a joint effort of West Coast states and British Columbia to create a low-carbon economy. In October 2013, governors from California, Oregon, Washington, Alaska and British Columbia pledged to roll out policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Among others, the agreement included a goal to boost sales of electric vehicles (EVs) to 10 percent of new car purchases by 2016.

The jewel of the new program is a peer-to-peer network, said Mary Kathryn Campbell, project manager with CALSTART and one of the people organizing the webinar series, one of the resources available through the initiative.

The idea is to present interested fleet managers and operators with real-life case studies of other fleets that have incorporated EVs into the mix and highlight what worked and didn't work from experience. First on the docket are examples from the city of Seattle and the country's largest municipal utility, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP), Campbell said. LADWP plans to purchase more than 150 plug-in replacement vehicles in 2015.

"We're targeting fleets like the city of Seattle that have done this and have even bigger electric vehicle goals to those who really have no idea what we're talking about," she said. "Some people are curious and interested but kind of skittish because they've never done this before. It's really a broad spectrum of fleets."

Interested fleet operators also have access to resources such as a downloadable toolkit featuring calculators that show the cost to replace traditional vehicles with electric.

"The goal is to give them all the resources they need to make an informed commitment," Campbell said.

So far, 22 fleets, including state and provincial fleets for Oregon, Washington, California and British Columbia, have signed on. Many large and small city fleets and some utility fleets have also joined. The hope is that private fleets will also take the pledge and sign on as the program builds momentum.

Charging the EV movement with fleets

Most state and city governments as well as many private companies, like taxi services and public utilities, operate a cadre of vehicles used for daily operations. For the budding EV market, that presents huge growth opportunities.

The purchase of ZEVs for fleets already represents a significant portion of the market, said Mark Wenzel, climate change adviser with the California EPA. In 2013, more than 42,000 medium- and heavy-duty vehicles were sold to fleets in California, Oregon and Washington. In addition to meeting state goals and cutting emissions, he said, ZEVs can provide a cost-savings value for fleet managers.

Fleet vehicles, for example, are often used for similar day-in, day-out activities, which makes it simpler to plan when and how to charge them, compared to a residential EV owner who may have to factor in a spur-of-the-moment trip. For fleets, this can mean a significant fuel savings cost without much drawback.

"Fleets often have fixed routes and charging opportunities," Wenzel said.

Spurring growth in the fleet sector is an area that hasn't received as much attention, he added, but it's important for the overall growth of the industry and to help California reach its climate change goals.

In March 2012, Gov. Jerry Brown (D) issued an executive order that mandated the state's own vehicle fleet would grow the number of ZEVs to at least 10 percent by 2015 and at least 25 percent by 2020. Overall, the state has a goal to get 1.5 million ZEVs on California's roads by 2025.

The hope is that state and city governments can lead the charge, said John Boesel, president and CEO of CALSTART, one of the groups that helped create the program. One barrier that fleet operators have expressed about adding EVs into their collections is the initial higher prices for an electric vehicle, he said.

"The opportunity here is if everybody follows through on their commitments, we'll see increased sales of electric vehicles and the increased sales will lead to better economies of scale, and that will lead to lower prices," Boesel said.

Ten percent is a pretty ambitious goal, said Nick Nigro, a senior manager with the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions and founder of Atlas Public Policy. Nigro, who

worked on the new program, said the initiative is geared toward educating fleet managers and operators on what it takes to add electric vehicles to their fleets and what the value is.

Despite California's leading role in EV sales -- nearly 50 percent of all EVs sold in the United States are sold in the state -- Nigro said the Pacific Coast Collaborative's regional partnership is crucial to both sending a market signal to car manufacturers and helping Western states meet their greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals.

"California has undeniably been a leader in facilitating the adoption of this technology, but if the market is going to stand on its own, there must be greater adoption nationwide, and regional partnerships are one way of attacking that problem," he said.

Nigro said the initiative will help to gather information on how EVs in fleets function across different climates and terrain as well as some of the cultural differences owners and operators might face in other states.

"By having other states join into a regional effort, there can be lessons learned," he said. "That is crucial."